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ABSTRACT

Teaching of English is involved in the transmission of culture in two ways: (1) it is part of the complex process through which culture is transmitted; and (2) it can be a vehicle for the transmission of culture. The English teacher is faced with a combination of the two tasks of enculturation and acculturation. The effective teacher must clearly understand what she is doing in terms of the cultural milieu of the educational system and the cultural composition of the class, and the concept of culture should be made an explicit part of the English curriculum. The format of literature courses can be designed so as to provide readings that illustrate the variety and the uniformities in American culture (DB)

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Teaching English as a Cultural Process

Wilfrid C. Bailey*

Introduction

All animals, including man, have certain biological needs which must be met if they are to survive. Food, water, and protection from extremes of weather are some of the obvious biological requirements for the preservation of life. In order to satisfy their needs, all species of animals have adapted to their environment. Man is a special type of animal. He has made tools to help him obtain the necessities of life. Toolmaking is the most visable aspect of culture. Briefly, culture consists of the habits and capabilities learned by man as a member of society. A culture is the total way of life shared by a group of human beings. Culture includes all forms of learning and patterns of behavior developed living together in groups. A child learns the ways of the people who rear him and teach him what they know. He, in turn, will pass on his culture to his children.

A culture may be viewed as a stream behavior running through time and space. At some point an individual enters, usually through birth, this stream and learns to use it. Eventually, he leaves it, usually through death, but the culture continues on. The crucial fact is that each individual must and does learn enough of the culture in which he lives in order to meet his needs.

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However, this learning process is never left to chance. Each culture has developed a system of mechanisms to insure the fact that each new individual will acquire those elements that make him a fully functioning member of society. Although it is true that this process is not always complete, a minimum level of success is necessary for perpetuation of the culture.

The process of learning one's culture is called enculturation. When there are formal or special institutions to carry out this task, it is education. A school is one form of the educational process. Teaching of English is one of the multiplicity of activities carried out in schools.

With this point of view, teaching of English is a cultural process. This paper will examine this process. Teaching of English is involved in the process of transmitting culture in two ways. First, teaching of English is a part of the complex process through which culture is transmitted. Second, the teaching of English can be a vehicle for the transmission of culture.

English as a Process for Teaching Culture

Language and culture are inseparable. Language is the means of communicating, or passing on to others the culture of a group of people. The learning of language is crucial in the learning of culture. It is in the process of learning a language that a child learns his culture. As the American child learns the word "father" or "dad", he learns that this sound pattern represents a male member of his household who plays with him, rewards him, and punishes him. The Hopi child learns the Hopi word for father and at the same time learns certain behavior which characterizes his father.

In this case, the Hopi child does not associate the word "father" with punishment, because in Hopi culture, the child's mother's brother, or maternal uncle, is responsible for his behavior. Thus, it can be seen that language reflects the culture and that the process of acquiring the language and acquiring the culture are interlocking.

Acquiring a language requires not only the mastering of sounds, but also the association of these sounds with concepts. Speech and thought originate independently in the human child. The infant performs preverbal thinking and preintellectual phonation or even verbalization. A child eventually learns the inter-articulation of speech and thought. (Vygotsky, 1962). Children reared under conditions of emotional and social deprivation suffer a delay or deficit of biological readiness for learning a language. Also verbal stimulation prior to the point of readiness may be influential in laying the psychological ground work for language. (Church, 1961).

Children do not learn a language but are taught through some system. In most cultures some significance is placed on the child's acquisition of the native language. However, different cultures have varying beliefs concerning how language is learned. For instance, an Arapaho child whose fontanels were beginning to harden--"one that was just old enough to talk"--was fed cooked meat and boiled eggs of meadow lark. The belief was that the child so fed would talk early and have knowledge of things. Moving the meadow lark's bill back and forth between the child's lips was thought to make it talk. When the child was older he was taught words by being directed to concentrate on and then to repeat names of articles.

Members of his family would say, "Here", to get the child's attention, then show him an article and have him pronounce the name after they did. (Hilger, 1952)

When the Balinese baby is born, the midwife, even at the moment of lifting him in her arms, will put words in his mouth, commenting, "I am just a poor little newborn baby, and I don't know how to talk properly, but I am grateful to you, honorable people, who have entered this pigsty of a house to see me born." From this moment on, the baby is fitted into a frame of behavior, of imputed speech and imputed thought and complex gesture, far beyond his skill and maturity. While the American mother tries to get the child to imitate simple courtesy phrases, the Balinese mother recites them, in the first person, and the child finally slips into speech. The first time he answers "Tiang" (the self-subordinating ego pronoun) he will be echoing a word said many hundreds of times on his behalf.

The Balinese learn almost nothing from verbal instruction and most are incapable of following out the three consecutive orders which we regard as the sign of a normal three year old intelligence. The one way it is possible to give complex verbal instructions is to pause after each detail and let the listener repeat after you. The same is true of storytelling. The Balinese storyteller does not continue along throughout a long tale, as storytellers in most cultures do, but he makes a simple statement: "There was once a princess," to which his listeners answer, "Where did she live?" or "What was her name?" and so on, until the narrative has been communicated in dialogue.

McCarthy gives a good description of language learning in middle class American culture. She states that if a child takes part in conversation at the breakfast table before going to school, his language ability in school is improved. (1954) In spite of the variations in the details of the process, most children do learn a language. While the overall growth process is the same for all children, cultures differ from each other in the way in which the growth process is interwoven with learning.

The foregoing suggests that the learning process is, in many ways, something that is learned. This process varies from culture to culture. Studies in American schools suggest that children in their native cultural situation may learn in quite different ways or "styles". A study of styles of learning among minority group children in the Southwest found that rural Spanish-American children were more adapt at using auditory channels of communication while American Indian groups showed unexpected strength in handling information through visual channels. (Garber, 1968)

Teaching of English within a homogenous classroom is a clear-cut case of the enculturation process. By homogenous we mean a monocultural situation in which all the pupils together with their teacher represent a single culture and have equal access to that culture. Much has been written about situations where the pattern of English taught by teachers is different from that used by the pupils. Most of the literature focused on lower social class children whose level of living is considered to be inadequate. They came to school from homes lacking many of the things found in middle class homes. Their life experiences did not include some of those common to the teacher's background. The utterances of these children did not fit the pattern being taught in the classroom.

Standard testing procedures lead to the erroneous conclusion that these children had an insufficient or underdeveloped linguistic system.

In a similar manner, teachers in schools for American Indians take the reservation pattern of English as non-English. They rate the children's reading ability by means of formal standardized tests developed for standard English speakers. The following is the reaction of a teacher after administering such a test:

> I have just finished giving all the second through seventh graders I.Q. tests. WOW! Now I know why I usually had the feeling of beating my head against the proverbial brick wall! I have out of eight students tested, only one I.Q. over 76!! They're all of the near-idiot caliber. God! I was bowled over. Then I figured out their respective mental ages and this was just another shock wave!! --even my 13-15 year olds have mental ages of 10!! How can you stop from lowering your standards after reading results like this? (Wolcott, 1967, pp. 90-91)

Many teachers and researchers failed to take into account the cultural background of the students and its relationship to the cultural background assumed in standardized tests. This gave rise to the term "culturally deprived."

The concept of the cultural deprived assumes that certain individuals have been deprived of culture. That is, they have not acquired a full complement of culture. The result is a vacuum approach. The child arrives not knowing anything and this void must be filled. A similar perspective is that of disorganization. For example, the lower class Negro family consisting of a mother and her children with a series of husbands or male friends, when viewed from a middle class model, is a disorganized family. (Deutsch, 1963) Recent examination of the situation has revealed that this type of family is not disorganized but, in reality, exhibits a very consistant pattern of behavior.

It is actually a special type of family, not a lack of family. (Gonzalas, 1969)

In addition, efforts to describe the linguistic difficiencies of Negro children have revealed that there are consistencies to their speech patterns. This has given rise to the concept of nonstandard English. The best descriptions are of Negro nonstandard English. (Steward, 1970) The nonverbal pattern described by teachers can be seriously questioned. Teachers and testers represent an outside and, frequently, hostile world. When faced with such people, it is best to say as little as possible. When observed in non-hostile situations, there is a high level of verbal activity. Thus, failure to respond is not necessarily a lack of linguistic skill.

The problem of recognition of nonstandard forms of English is not restricted to the United States. It is a question debated in many parts of the world including India. There is a growing acceptance of the idea that Indian English is not bad English or baboo English. "Indian English is only a variety of English whose characteristics stem from the life and culture of the people of India. And the Indianness of it consists in its cultural overtones and undertones and not in a legalization of the ignorant misuse of English." (Verghese, 1970) This concept could be used for an analysis and achieving a real understanding of nonstandard English used by various sub-cultures represented in American classrooms.

The recognition of non-standard behavior of groups in the classroom as representing subcultures rather than nonculture or disorganized cultures has lead to the application of two new terms to replace that of the culturally deprived.

The first of these is "culturally disadvantaged." This term expresses a willingness to allow the presence of subcultures but makes a value judgment. The implication is that the cultural background of the children places them at a disadvantage in the present situation. The basic assumption is that the traditional cultural pattern must be replaced by that of the mass society or dominating society.

Although the English teacher eliminates the label substandard English in favor of nonstandard English, there remains a built-in bias. Use of the prefix "non" implies that, while there are a variety of dialects, they are not of equal value. There is one that is "standard." Economic opportunities for minority groups are increasingly tied to the ability to use standard English. This has lead to the well-known task of teaching-English-as-a-second language.

A crucial question may be whether the goal of economic opportunity for all carries with it the price of monocultural society. There are those who argue "that the United States is a polycultural society with monocultural schools, and this is the first and perhaps most damaging inequity foisted on the poverty child." (Williams, 1970) Raven I. McDavid, studying the speech of various groups in Chicago, concluded that it is not an adequate solution to teach minorities to use an American middle class dialect exclusively. Instead, they should be taught to use both standard English and that of their own group. "A man's dialect--even a child's--is his most intimate possession and the badge of membership in his group. To stigmitize the language of those he sees every day as if it were <u>per se</u> something morally odius would alienate him from his family without translating him into the dominate culture." (McDavid, 1964)

A more nearly neutral term to apply to cultural variation is "cultural different." This stresses the position that although the child comes from a cultural background that is different, no value judgment is made as to its "correctness." A variety of solutions are then possible. Included is the retention and reinforcement of the "different" culture in such a way as to overcome problems growing out of competing in a multicultural situation. Although this is the most popular approach today there are certain dangers. Recognition of the legitimacy of the minority culture should not be an excuse for doing nothing. Over romantization of the traditional culture could retard making adjustments in order to cope with long-range changes taking p'ace in the world that are beyond their control.

The American sterotype of the future minority groups has been based on the widespread belief in the "melting pot" theory. Millions of middle class Americans trace their origins to immigrant groups. The notion of cultural pluralism has not been part of the American dream. It comes as a shock that there are still large groups of culturally unassimilated. Furthermore, many of these people do not want to lose their cultural heritage, and speak of self-determination as an alternative to the forced melting pot of yesteryear. This includes a demand for bilingual instruction. (John and Horner, 1970)

The question becomes one of acculturation vs. biculturalism. Should the pupil be taught the dominate culture as a substitute for his original cultural training or enculturation? Should he be taught a second culture in such a way as to be able to function in it, yet, at the same time, be able to retain and continue to live in his original culture?

Some investigators are convinced that most of the minority group students' scholastic difficulties stem from a feeling of alienation resulting from pressure for acculturation, and that bicultural education would do much to relieve this problem. The remedy is difficult because of the structure of the schools and nature of educational materials. "If Dick and Jane are middle-class, the teacher is even more so. Even worse, many teachers are suspected of having lower middle-class origins, which means that they have been through a struggle for upward mobility which has desensitized them to the problems of the poor and the culturally different." (Coombs, 1970, p. 64) This author observed teachers on one Indian reservation and found that the teacher who appeared to be the most rigid in keeping all elements of Indian culture out of her classroom was a member of the tribe who had come back to teach after college training off the reservation.

The difference between the language of the English class and that of the child may range from bilingualism (two different languages), to biglossia (high and low forms of the same language), to bi-dialectal speech (co-existence and complementary use of a national standard language and a local or regional dialect). (Lounsbury, 1961, pp. 309-313) These situations can stem from two sources. First, there is a deliberate simultaneous training of children to speak more than one language. Second, this may result from contact between two groups using different languages. The former is rare and usually limited to children of the higher social classes. It presents few problems to the teachers of public schools. The latter is more common and is frequently complicated by unequal social class position of language groups involved.

Much has been said about the damage, both emotional and intellectual, inflicted upon the child forced to cope with schooling in an alien cultural and linguistic milieu. Is bilingual education the answer? The belief is that bilingual education starting with the child's language and moving into the language of dominate culture has pedagogical soundness. The claim is that where early schooling is in the vernacular in the first few years pupils are more able to learn in the standard languages. John and Horner reviewed research findings and concluded that while the claims of bilingual education are still unproven from the strictly scientific point of view that:

> It thus appears to us that one of the great benefits of bilingual instruction of young children may be helping them to develop the use of language for problem solving in their native language. Once they have learned the value of words for problem solving in their native language. Once they have learned the value of words for memory and thought, they can apply this functional knowledge of language to the acquisition of a second language. The second language may serve to extend the child's intellectual skills. (1970, p. 149)

There is even a suggestion that bilingual education could benefit members of the class from the dominate culture speaking the standard language. Bilingual children in Montreal scored significantly higher on intelligence tests than their monolingual peers. The investigators conclude that "the bilinguals appear to have a more diversified set of mental abilities than the monolinguals." (Peal and Lambert, 1962, p. 14)

Will bidialectal training in the English classroom have the same effect? This is a problem for future research? Another result could be better intergroup understanding.

The greatest obstacle for testing these propositions is the lack of available materials for use in the classroom. There are implications for teacher training. A possible partial answer was found in September, 1970, Newsletter from the Southwestern Cooperative Educational Laboratory located in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Training of teachers of English as a second language included Urdu, one of the East Indian languages, to make the teachers aware of the difficulties encountered by non-English speaking pupils.

The teacher of English in the classroom is faced with a combination of two tasks. One is enculturation and the other is acculturation. Enculturation is the basic or original acquisition of culture by the child. Acculturation is the process through which the cultural background of the child is modified as a result of contact with another culture. In this context, enculturation is learning the first culture and acculturation is learning a second culture. The nature of the process varies according to the relationship between the culture of the pupil and cultural source of what is taught. (1) When the culture of the school and the pupil is the same, the process is enculturation. (2) When the culture of the school and that of the pupil are different, the process is acculturation. This usually results when the child's basic enculturation process is within his home culture, and at school age he is confronted with a new cultural environment. (3) When the initial learning is conducted by another culture, it is enculturation for the child but acculturation for the child's cultural group.

For example, if the child is in a school representing a culture different from that of his home when it is the appropriate time to learn an occupation, he may learn skills different than his parents. Since this is initial learning for the child, it is enculturation. However, the end result may be changing the culture in which the parents live and be acculturation for them. (4) When education of the individual is to make up for what was missed in the expected educational process, it is delayed enculturation. Literacy training for adults in a culture that is regularly literate would be enculturation. (5) When education is to introduce skills not already present in the culture, the process is acculturation. Thus literacy training in a nonliterate culture would be acculturation. (6) The educational process in a heterogenous classroom may be enculturation for some pupils and acculturation for others. Standard English instruction is continued enculturation for the members of the teacher's culture, but acculturation for the children speaking nonstandard English. (7) The educational process for any one pupil may be both enculturation and acculturation at the same time. That is, some of the elements that must be learned may be additions to his original culture while other tasks may require replacing something previously learned with elements from another culture. First graders learning to write are being enculturated. However, when this must be done in a second language, linguistic acculturation is added to the process. Thus speakers of nonstandard English have a much more complicated task than the speakers of standard English.

English As A Process For Teaching Culture

Teaching English is clearly a part of the complicated process of transmission of culture from one generation to the next and from one group to another. The setting in which the English teacher works is intermeshed with the total functioning cultural whole. In this sense it is a cultural process.

The effective teacher of English must have a clear understanding of what she is doing in terms of the cultural milieu of the educational system and the cultural composition of the class. This can be a great challenge. However, it is suggested that the teacher can play more than a passive role of attempting to function to the best of her ability in a variety of complex cultural situations. There is the opportunity for a actively increasing the pupils awareness of the cultural process of which they are a part.

The concept of culture should be made an explicit part of the English curriculm. This can be done in two ways. First, language is a part of culture. Foreign language textbooks usually contain materials on the culture using that language. In order to understand some of the aspects of the language the student needs to have some knowledge of the culture. Discussion of both standard and nonstandard English can be used to highlight facets of American culture. If nothing more, the presentation of nonstandard English as being a language with a structure can be used to show that the users of that language have a pattern of culture and do not necessarily represent a state of disorganization.

Second, literature is a vast resource for the study of culture. Anthropologists frequently utilize the literature of various societies in order to study their culture. Literature is an expression of the culture of the writers. Novelists, poets, and others provide their readers with an immense variety of commentaries on life. The history of literature is also a commentary on the history of man's social and cultural conditions. The literary creator has the ability to articulate through his fantasy life as he sees and feels it. He does this with a richness of expression rarely achieved by the trained anthropologist. Although fiction is not a substitute for systematic accmulation of knowledge through scientific certification, it can be based on deep insights. In some cases, the authors' own experiences are supplemented by careful research. Over concern for scientific purity should not be permitted to deny the use of literary expression as a media for conveying and understanding of culture. This is particularly true when one is reminded that one of the great contributions of anthropology is its humanistic view of man.

I know of no work in anthropology that attempts to achieve a description of American culture through literature. Lewis A. Coser assembled a reader, Sociology Through Literature, to be used in introductory sociology courses. (Coser, 1963) Some of the works of Chinua Achebe are recognized as being great social documents, dramatizing the traditional life of African villagers. (1967, 1959) Any teacher of American literature would not be hard put to compile a list of writings that do the same for American culture. Why not redesign the format of literature courses so that the readings are selected to present themes that illustrate both the rich variety and the uniformities in American culture.

Through them students can gain an appreciation for the concept of culture, the integrity of that of their neighbors, and the meaning of their own. This can be done without sacrificing the traditional greats in literature. In fact, it will put them into a more meaningful perspective. At the same time, it will probably bring to light often overlooked authors who had something important to say about the world we live in.

In conclusion, culture is a concept that must not be overlooked by teachers of English. "Culture fills and largely determines the course of our lives, yet rarely intrudes into conscious thought." (Herskovits, 1948, p. 18) The teacher has the two fold task of understanding the culture of the situation in which she teaches and that of conveying cultural understanding to her students. They can learn together.

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